Dan D. Lyons

Octember 1, 2012

7th Period

**Piracy in Africa**

Black Beard, the Jolly Roger, peg legs, parrots, and pistols…These are the images our minds conjure when someone mentions pirates. Movies, television, and literature have been instrumental in creating these images, linking piracy to an era that has long passed. Yet, what is surprising to many students is that pirates still exist. They may not fit the traditional image most Americans have, but piracy is a major concern in several spots around the world, especially off the coasts of Somalia and Nigeria. Pirates in these regions have similar demographics and the way other nations respond to the issue is similar. However, their methods of attack and statistical trends show different patterns.

Pirates in these regions have several clear similarities: motive, poverty, and ineffective responses by government. In both nations, pirates come primarily from the ranks of the poor. A *60 Minutes* report on Somali pirates indicated that young men become crew members because they feel there is no other alternative. In a country wrought by battling warlords, drought, and extreme poverty, piracy offers a way to make a good living. Nigeria, which according to Reuters, has Africa’s second largest economy, over 100 million people live on less than one dollar a day. Thus, just as in Somalia, people see piracy as a way to make good money.

In both of these countries, motive is assisted by the fact that law enforcement doesn’t have the means to effectively curtail and prosecute suspected pirates. The *CIA World Factbook* describes Somalia’s government as transitional, with no permanent government in place. Currently, warlords are fighting for control of the nation, so there is no central figure of authority that can intervene on behalf of merchant sailors. Likewise, Nigeria has a young federal republic (founded in 2007), that is dealing with corruption and tension between religious and ethnic groups. In both of these countries, even if pirates are captured, they are usually set free, because their courts do not the authority to prosecute crimes committed at sea. As a result, the effort to curb piracy has been met at an international level. Nations such as the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Denmark have developed a strong naval presence that has been instrumental in cutting the number of incidences in Somalia in half in the past year alone and these nations are increasing their presence in the Gulf of Guinea. In addition, a Reuters report from April 2012 states that the United States is providing training to African Union naval forces to strengthen local response to the issue in both countries.

Piracy has become a worldwide issue that has been complicated by poverty and poor leadership. As nations around the world intervene, methods and tactics evolve, creating mixed statistical trends. Americans largely live sheltered from this issue, seeing it only as images and words on TV or the Internet. Yet, many of the ships being attacked bring the very items they want and need in their homes every day. These are not Captain Jack Sparrow and the Pirates of the Caribbean. Pirates in Somalia and Nigeria pose a real risk to merchant ships, a risk that ultimately drives up the prices of the goods that we buy.